■ SPECIAL REPORT

Mary and her 'Little Lambs' launch a war

How a determined dowager used her money and political savvy to force Nixon's hand

Near the end of his life, Richard Nixon said that declaring war on cancer in 1971 was his presidency's greatest domestic achievement. But at the time he made the battle cry, Nixon cared little about curing cancer. He was pushed into his bold pronouncement by the adroit political maneuvering of a wealthy New York philanthropist named Mary Woodard Lasker.

THE WAR ON CANCER

She liked to call herself a "self-employed health lobbyist," but the truth is that for nearly half a century she was the single most influential figure behind the buildup of federal funds for biomedical research, according to revelations in her private papers reviewed by *U.S. News* and interviews with many of the participants. Mary and her "Little Lambs," a circle of socialites, congressmen and doctors, drove Congress to boost the budget of the National Institutes of Health from $2.8 million in 1945 to $11 billion in 1994, when she died at the age of 93.

Lasker worked her magic with charm, facts and money. (It had been earned by her late husband, Albert, an advertising genius who, among other things, persuaded women to take up smoking with the slogan, "Reach for a Lucky instead of a sweet.") She called former House Speaker Tip O'Neill "Darling Tip" and obtained the then experimental drug L-dopa for former Sen. Lister Hill, whose wife suffered from Parkinson's disease. Lasker made her way into the Kennedy White House by writing Jackie the first check – for $10,000 – to redecorate the White House.

Generous contributions to the war chests of congressmen on key committees got her in the door. Once there, she plied them with expensive ties from Europe and health fact books published by the National Health Education Committee, a group founded, funded and sometimes exclusively staffed by Lasker herself. "Cancer will strike 1 out of every 4 Americans now alive," she warned in 1958 in one of her fact books.

Rocky relationship. Up went the NIH budget. "Heart disease and cancer have more money because they are major causes of death," she once remarked. "Members of Congress can understand that." But for all her political acumen, Lasker found herself frozen out of the Nixon White House. In her oral history, which was sealed until her death, Lasker lamented, "Six members of his staff are Christian Scientists, and they are consequently totally opposed to research and medicine." Lasker had failed to support Nixon in either of his presidential bids. And she hated that Nixon wanted budget cuts at NIH, which had been at about $1 billion when he took office.

Lasker and her cronies drafted a dramatic plan for reawakening the public's interest in biomedical research: a war on cancer. In December 1969, the *New York Times* ran a full-page advertisement, paid for by the Citizens Committee for the Conquest of Cancer (another of Lasker's committees of one). "President Nixon, You Can Cure Cancer," blared the headline. "We lack only the will and the kind of money and comprehensive planning that went into putting a man on the moon. Why don't we try to conquer cancer by America's 200th birthday?"

UPI/BETTMANN

Scientifically, the ad was pure fantasy, and researchers at the National Cancer Institute were privately unnerved by it. They had no hope of finding a cure by 1976 for a disease that was still shrouded in mystery. Politically, the ad was sheer genius. Lasker chortled that it cost her $22,000, but "the White House got between 6,000 and 8,000 letters." Still, Nixon carried out his threat to curb runaway domestic spending and vetoed a bill that would have raised the NIH budget by $64 million.

Lasker then threw down her trump card, enlisting the help of Nixon's longtime supporter and friend Elmer Bobst, chairman of pharmaceutical giant Warner-Lambert. Bobst had brought Nixon to New York and set him up in law practice after his defeat in the 1962 governor's race in California. At a meeting in New York in 1970, Lasker told Bobst to "call in the chips" and urge the president to act against cancer. Nixon, recalls Elliot Richardson, then secretary of health, education and welfare, "was anxious to do something to please Bobst." But he was not yet prepared to commit more money to the NIH.

The Kennedy threat. Nixon changed his mind in January 1971, when Ted Kennedy assumed control of the key health committee in the Senate. Kennedy was one of Lasker's allies; his first speech after Chappaquiddick was at a testimonial dinner for one of Mary's lambs. The White House worried that Kennedy would run for president in 1972, Richardson recalls, and "we didn't want to give [him] the issue."

Nixon took up Lasker's banner in his State of the Union address on Jan. 22, 1971, pledging "$100 million to launch an intensive campaign to find a cure for cancer." When asked where his sudden interest in medicine came from, Nixon told reporters his favorite aunt had died of cancer.

Three months later, the conquest of cancer bill was trapped in political wrangling in the Senate. Once again, Lasker went straight to the people, enlisting the help of Eppie Lederer – a k a Ann Landers. In her first ever "Dear Reader" column, Lederer urged the public to write lawmakers in support of the bill. They wrote in droves. Former Sen. Alan Cranston received 60,000 letters in five weeks, and Senate staffers, swimming in a sea of mail, put up a sign that read, "Impeach Ann Landers." The bill was signed into law in December 1971, giving the NCI $800 million more over five years and allowing the director to send his budget requests directly to the White House.

With her whispery voice and spun-sugar hair, Lasker's demeanor belied a will of iron and an obsession with finding cures for disease that left her with many allies but few friends. "She was intimidating; everything about her was so strong," says Lederer, one of Lasker's few intimates. Her single-mindedness also prompted her to invest overblown hopes in treatments; she sold some of her own artwork to fund testing for interferon because she believed it could be the "magic bullet" to cure cancers. Forms of the drug are now used to treat some kinds of cancer, but her largest expectations for the drug did not materialize. Yet her dedication gave Lasker a level of influence far deeper than her pockets. "She had this incredible integrity in a world where some people aren't on the level," recalls Kennedy. "When you struck Mary Lasker's bell, it rang with authenticity and commitment."

Near the end of her life, Lasker lamented what she perceived as a lack of presidential will to combat disease. "Carter had no interest in health whatsoever," she said in the early '80s. "Reagan has not cut the cancer or other NIH budgets ... yet. God knows what will happen. Nixon turned out to be the most sympathetic president we've ever had." And when Mary Lasker died, biomedical research lost the most effective friend it ever had. ■

BY GARY COHEN AND SHANNON BROWNLEE

CECIL BEATON – COURTESY OF SOTHEBY'S LONDON

MARY LASKER, 1900-1994, PHILANTHROPIST / ACTIVIST

FAITH IN RESEARCH

"I am opposed to heart attacks, cancer and stroke the way I am opposed to sin," she said. That's why she backed all manner of medical research throughout her life. In later years, she was devoted to finding a cure for cancer and mounted the campaign that resulted in Richard Nixon's backing funding for the war in 1971 (far left). Some 54 winners of her prestigious science award have subsequently won the Nobel Prize.

■ *Some groups that help:*

American Cancer Society. *1599 Clifton Road NE, Atlanta, GA 30329-4251; (800) 227-2345; http://www.cancer.org*

American Lung Association. *11740 Broadway, New York, NY 10019-4374; (800) 586-4872*

American Prostate Society. *1340 Charwood Road. Suite F. Hanover, MD 21076; (800) 308-1106*

Cure for Lymphoma Foundation. *1 Dag Hammarskjold Plaza, New York, NY 10017; (212) 319-5857*

National Alliance of Breast Cancer Organizations. *1180 Avenue of the Americas, 2nd floor. New York, NY 10036; (212) 719-0154*

National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship. *1010 Wayne Avenue, 5th floor, Silver Spring, MD 20910; (301) 650-8868*

National Kidney Cancer Association. *1234 Sherman Avenue, Suite 203, Evanston, IL 60202-1375; (708) 332-1051; Internet: nkca@merle.acns.nwu.edu*